

SOVIET REPORTED WORKING ON BOMB FIRED FROM ORBIT

Nuclear Weapon Could Be Put in Operation by Next Year, McNamara Says

BUT HE ISN'T CONCERNED

Defense Chief Sees Serious Disadvantages in System and Rules It Out for U.S.

Text of McNamara statement is printed on Page 2.

By NEIL SHEEHAN

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 3 — The Soviet Union is almost certainly developing an orbital nuclear bomb that could be put into operation as early as 1968, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara said today at a Pentagon news conference.

Mr. McNamara said intelligence information gathered by the United States about a series of space tests now being conducted by the Soviet Union had led to the conclusion in the last month or so that the tests were aimed at "the possible development by the Soviet of something we have called a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System or FOBS."

He explained that the FOBS was called a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System because the warhead would normally not make a full orbit, or complete circuit of the earth, before it was fired at a target on the ground.

Warhead Weight Estimated

Asked how heavy a warhead the FOBS could carry, Mr. McNamara said it could vary from one to three megatons (the equivalent of one to three million tons of TNT).

He then said under questioning that this warhead was about the same size as those carried on each of the 650 submarine-launched Polaris missiles the United States has deployed.

Polaris warheads are often referred to as "city busters," and one to three megatons is considered sufficient to demolish the city of New York.

The Soviet tests have been in progress since September of 1966. Soviet military leaders talked as early as November, 1965, about an "orbital missile" that could deliver nuclear warheads "on the first or any other orbit around the earth."

Uncertainty Conceded

Mr. McNamara said it was still "impossible to be certain" exactly what the tests were for and that the Russians could be "testing space vehicles for some re-entry program."

"I think it more likely," he said, however, "that they are working on the FOBS rather than on re-entry vehicles. It's too early to be sure, but the weight of the evidence points toward the former."

"If this turns out to be true, it is conceivable that they could achieve an initial operational capability during 1968."

Despite this prospect, Mr. McNamara said that he was

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"not concerned" for a number of reasons and that the United States had no intention of developing its own orbital nuclear bomb.

He asserted that the FOBS weapon had serious disadvantages compared with the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile System, which, along with manned strategic bombers, the United States depends on for its nuclear offensive capability.

Advantages Offset

The deployment of a new long-range, over-the-horizon radar by the United States in February of 1968 would also offset whatever advantage the Russians would gain from the deployment of the FOBS weapon, he contended.

"Some years ago we ourselves examined the desirability of the FOBS and there was agreement among civilian and military leaders that there was no need for our country to develop any such system," he said.

While development of it could be initiated at any time for relatively rapid deployment, our analyses conclude that it would not improve our strategic offensive posture and consequently we have no intention of revising the decision made years ago."

Mr. McNamara said that once the warhead was fired, there would be only about three minutes' warning before it hit its target.

The Intercontinental Ballistic Missile System that is now deployed, Mr. McNamara explained, fires a warhead into a high trajectory above the earth like a bullet until the warhead "reaches a peak altitude of perhaps 800 miles." It then plunges back into the atmosphere toward its target.

But the orbital bomb, he said, is initially launched "into a very low orbit about 100 miles above the earth."

Re-entry Path Followed

"At a given point—generally before the first orbit is complete—a rocket engine is fired which slows down the payload and causes it to drop out of orbit," he said. "The payload then follows a re-entry path similar to the re-entry of a ballistic missile."

The long, low trajectory of the orbital bomb gives it the advantage of being able to avoid detection by the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System radar, which the United States has deployed. The BMEWS is designed to detect incoming warheads at a much higher trajectory.

The other principal advantage of the FOBS weapon, he said, is that the defending forces could not determine the target "until ignition of the rocket engine that deboosts the payload out of orbit—roughly three minutes and 500 miles from the target."

But the FOBS weapon has the two serious disadvantages, Mr. McNamara said, of being "significantly less" accurate than an ICBM and of being limited to a nuclear warhead "but a fraction" of the weight of an ICBM payload.

Because of its capability to detect warheads or other space vehicles approaching on a long, low trajectory, Mr. McNamara said, the new American over-the-horizon radar will negate both advantages of the FOBS weapon.

The over-the-horizon radar would detect the FOBS weapon soon after it is launched and would therefore provide much more warning time than American defenders might have if they had to wait until the warhead was finally fired.

When asked if the Russians

could not simply put one or two FOBS weapons in orbit around the earth disguised as ordinary space satellites and then fire their warheads at the United States at the last minute in a surprise attack, Mr. McNamara said that this would do the Soviet Union no good.

To be effective, he said, the Russians would have to launch a large number of FOBS weapons simultaneously, and the over-the-horizon radar would give the United States adequate warning of this obviously hostile development.

In a statement at the beginning of the news conference, Mr. McNamara asserted that the over-the-horizon radar "will give us more warning time against a full-scale attack using FOBS missiles than BMEWS does against the ICBS launch."

Under subsequent questioning, however, he said that the over-the-horizon radar could conceivably provide "roughly 15 minutes" of warning of a FOBS weapon attack, about the same warning time the BMEWS could give of an ICBM assault.

Mr. McNamara said that the United States began deployment of the over-the-horizon radar about 60 days ago after several years of development and used the system to help provide intelligence on the apparent Soviet development of a FOBS weapon.

Accuracy Questioned

He also contended that the FOBS weapon "would not be accurate enough for a satisfactory attack upon United States Minuteman missiles, protected in their silos."

Mr. McNamara was then asked why the Russians would conceivably develop such a weapon if it was going to be of so little use to them.

"I think the most logical explanation," he said, "is that we have maintained a very large bomber force in contrast to their relatively smaller bomber force and we will continue to maintain them (the bombers) in the future."

"They think they can eliminate the bomber force by eliminating the warning time that the bomber force needs to survive."

The United States has about 630 B-52 and B-58 strategic

bombers in service and intends to maintain 465 B-52's and new F-111 bombers in operation through the early nineteen-seventies. The Soviet Union has 200 to 250 strategic bombers.

Mr. McNamara explained that the 15-minute warning of an ICBM attack provided by the early-warning radar system enable the bombers on a permanent airborne alert to move toward their targets and those on ground alert to take off.

"What the FOBS does," Mr. McNamara said, "is to circumvent the BMEWS. But we counter their action with a reaction to gain early warning with the over-the-horizon radar and so we recapture the warning time."

Moscow Silent

MOSCOW, Saturday, Nov. 4 (Reuters)—There was no information here this morning to confirm the statement by Mr. McNamara that the Soviet Union was developing an orbital nuclear bomb.